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A

R O D

FOR THE

SLUGGARD;

OR THE

GREAT EVIL

OF

IDLENESS REPRESENTED.

BY JOHN MACGOWAN.

L O N D O N :

Printed for G. KEITH, in Talbot Court, Grace-
Church Street ; and J. JOHNSON, No. 72, in
St. Paul's Church Yard.

MDCCCLXXII.

R O D

STUGGARD



PRINTED BY

JOHN MACGOWAN

LONDON

Printed by J. Macgowan, at the
British Museum, and J. Johnson, No. 7, St. Paul's Church-yard.

MDCCLXX

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ROD FOR THE SLUGGARD;

OR THE

Great Evil of IDLENESS Represented.

THE following Discourse on a branch of Christian morality, not very frequently insisted on, I shall found upon that striking, and beautifully figurative passage of Solomon, in Eccles. x. 18. *By much slothfulness the building decayeth, and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through.*

This is given as the opinion of the wise man, after the most extensive experience, and the closest attention to moral objects. Amongst the many discoveries he made, this is one, that as on the one hand he saw, generally speaking, the hand of the diligent to make rich; on the other he found, that want cometh certainly and irresistibly upon the slothful and indolent: that in the nature of things, and from the relation between cause and effect, *By much slothfulness the building decayeth, and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through.*

He evidently saw, that the bounty of our moral governor has not, in itself, the

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least tendency to tie the hand of diligence, or to prevent the utmost exertion of every natural and moral power; but, on the contrary, that it is the best incentive to human industry. The Psalmist addressing himself to his God, and taking a survey of the brutal inhabitants of this world, useth these remarkable words*, *These all wait upon thee, that thou mayest give them their meat in due season. That thou givest them they gather; thou openest thine hand, and they are filled with good.* These words most beautifully display the law, which the whole system of being is under to the Almighty Creator, whose bounty is the only efficient of their subsistence; the obligation all are under to gather† the blessings of his bounty, in the use of appointed means. And although spoken primarily, with reference to the brutal ranks, it cannot but be very proper to apply them to reasonable men; as it would be absurd to suppose that the all-wise Creator, by an invariable stated law, should have subjected unthinking animals to diligence, in gathering the blessings of his Providence, and have left his vicegerent man, whom

* Psalm civ. 27, 28.

† To gather—The word gather is here chosen rather than collect, in allusion to the passage above quoted from the sweet Singer of Israel.

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he hath ennobled with his own image, and adorned with thinking powers, unsubjected to any such obligation. In the days of Israel's peregrinations in the wilderness, their God was indeed pleased graciously to depart from the usual rules of his Providence, and by a miracle to feed them for forty years; yet still so, as that his blessings should be sought with industry, and that they should gather with their own hands, the provision made for their sustenance. The manna fell indeed in all the camp, but not within any of their tents; and, although it fell even by the tent doors, it dropt into none of their mouths. He gave them manna in the greatest abundance, but they must gather it, ere they could feed; every man must seek his own provision, every man his Homer. None could live upon the industry of his neighbour; so that if any neglected to gather, he must even fast it out, till the next return of the corn of heaven*. From hence we are taught, that plenty of means has, in itself, no tendency to promote their neglect or disuse. God gives many precious blessings to his people, in the use of means; but all his gifts must be sought for in the ordinances of his house, where his blessed

* Psalm lxxviii. 24.

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provisions are given to the hungry ; and he fares the best who is most diligent in his own special appointments, for he filleth their mouths with his goodness. Strange as it may seem, there really is such a thing as being gluttoned with a plenty of the means, and a perverting the designs of grace, by taking occasion, from the richness of the Redeemer's bounty, to indulge ourselves unto slothfulness and neglect ; till our appetite for spiritual things is so far gone, as to lothe even the honey-comb itself ; and because we have means so exceedingly plenty, we profit by them little or nothing. Our gracious Provider giveth his good things only to the hungry ; the dull, the heavy, and fat soul is usually sent empty away.

How beautiful is it to see, on the one hand, the bounty of our God poured down about our camp in plentiful showers ; and, on the other hand, to see the munificence of heaven serving to quicken the zeal, and promote the activity of its dependants, so that they are up with early diligence, and holy industry, to gather the bounties of their God. But what an unlovely scene does slothfulness present, and how truly contemptible does it render its subjects ? Ask the wise man, for he can tell you *.

I went by the field of the slothful, and by

* Prov. xxiv. 30, 31.

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the vineyard of the man void of understanding; and lo! it was all grown over with thorns, nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down. What a landskip is here? How awfully picturesque are the consequences of slothfulness? And how disagreeable, yea, how shocking is the dwelling of the sluggard? The slothful man, and the man void of understanding, are both but one person; an idle hand being a certain symptom of a vain and foolish heart. Wisdom is like faith, it can only be known by its fruits; and slothfulness being no evidence either of wisdom or faith, the holy scripture sets down the idle, slothful person, for both a fool and infidel. His vineyard and fields are eye-sores to the public, and nuisances to the commonwealth. His farm is a thorny wilderness, rather than a fruitful field, and his vineyard more fit for an habitation of dragons, than likely to yield delight to the rational beholder. Such is the case of that professor, who is careless in the use of the means of grace. His soul is uncultivated like the sluggard's garden; whilst he sleeps in security, the nettles and thorns spring up with luxuriance. His heart is more like a den of dragons, a cage of filthy birds, or a pit where serpents are fostered, than the throne
of

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of the holy immaculate Redeemer; and his conduct is an evident flight upon the bounties of sovereign grace, instead of manifesting a desire after the enjoyment of its Author. I may add, that not unlike to the vineyard of the slothful, is that church where discipline is neglected; discipline is as the stone wall of the vineyard, which, when broken down, the wild bear of the forest, foxes both great and small, may enter in, to devour and to tread underfoot. As in other cases, it is here, *the hand of the diligent maketh rich* *. Diligence secureth the house, ennobles and beautifies the landskip.

To come now to a more particular illustration of the subject, I shall consider this slothfulness or idleness of the hands, as it may refer to the things of this life. — To Christians in a collective capacity, — and to individual professors of religion, as they use, or disuse, the appointed means of grace.

I. Sloth, or idleness of hands, is common enough, even as it respects the things of this present life, notwithstanding its absurdity, and its unwarrantableness by all laws, divine and human. In the nature of things, the end is not to be expected

* Prov. x. 4.

without

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without the use of the means. If you would go to France, you must cross the waters; if you would live comfortably, you must act diligently; or if you would dwell in safety, you must stand upon your guard. The voice of the law is, "*He that will not work let him not eat* *;" yet, in defiance of divine authority, some are so sottishly stupid, and void of understanding, that they expect the end, without the means, and to eat whether they work or not. But these sluggards are the pest of society; the burden of the church; and their own destroyers.

First, They are the pests of society; as from the baneful source of idleness, do spring almost all disorders, which disturb the peace, and endanger the property of individuals. Sinners arrived at the very zenith of villany, capable of perpetrating deeds the most daring, and horrid, are usually found to have begun their course of iniquity, in an aversion to business, or idleness of the hands. Who are capable of raising tumults, and committing riots, but idle profligates, the avowed enemies to honest industry? To what purpose are watchmen appointed, to patrol the streets, in the silent hours of general repose, but to protect the industrious, against the ra-

* 2 Thef. iii. 10.

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pine and violence of the slothful vagabond? When you travel by the way, or are late abroad on the evening, you apprehend no evil, at the hand of the diligent labourer, how indigent soever; but you dread an encounter with the idle villain, whose aversion to honest labour, leads him, like the wild beasts of the forests, to prey upon his neighbours. They that are conversant in criminal courts, must necessarily form the most terrible ideas of an idle course of life, and see the necessity for parents and masters, not only keeping their children, and apprentices, constantly employed, but by all possible means restraining them, from the company of those, who discover an aversion to business or learning. As an aversion to learning in infancy, is usually followed by such an aversion to business in youth, and manhood, from which the most dreadful consequences may be naturally apprehended.

I would advise every young one, who may happen to read this little Tract, to avoid the company of all youth, who are often detected in a neglect of their proper business, with as much care, as you would avoid the hole of an adder. For those who mind not their proper business, must be worse employed; and hence it is, that none are addicted to idleness, but such as are wickedly

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wickedly given. Therefore they are sure to be injurious to every one, who desires to live with honour in the world, procuring for themselves things honest in the sight of all men. But if you see a child diligent, in his pursuit of learning whilst at school, or a youth that is faithful and industrious in his master's service, cultivate an acquaintance with him, for honour shall certainly be his attendant, and he shall be a blessing to society, for *a man diligent in his business shall not be amongst mean men, but shall stand before kings**, whilst the slothful and idle shall be cloathed with rags, and pinched with penury and famine.

Secondly, The idle or slothful person is not only the pest of society in general, but should he, by any means, gain admittance into a gospel church, he becomes a burden or dead weight upon it, and as such ought by no means to be tolerated, much less relieved. In the nature of things, the community can receive no manner of assistance from him, either in things spiritual or temporal. In regard to temporal things, he is cloathed with rags; involved in want merely through the idleness of his hands, so that he can lend no manner of assistance, however heavy their burdens may fall upon them. And were he even

* Prov. xxii. 29.

possessed

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possessed of spiritual gifts; they may not communicate with him therein, as he is a disorderly person; a stain to the gospel profession; and a scandal to that church unhappily burdened with his indolence.

Suppose, for instance, that a professor of this cast stands in the relation of a servant to a master who is no professor; what is likely to be his reasoning in such a case, concerning the church with whom the sluggard is connected? I can give you a specimen of what I myself have heard, and what I deem very injurious to the reputation of any religious society whatever. Says MUNDANO to me one day, "I don't love these religious servants, who pretend to more sanctity than their neighbours, and yet, at the same time, are more unprofitable members of society, than many who make no profession of religion at all. There is *Indolus*, my man, a fellow who might be very useful if he would, but who is so idle and careless, that there is no bearing with him. His is honest, I believe, so that I can trust him; but there is no getting him up in any reasonable time in the morning; and if he is sent upon business through the day, one knows not when he will return; and my business at home is frequently neglected, for the sake of some frivolous matter or other. So that I believe

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lieve I must and shall part with him. And yet this fellow is a member of — church, and one that thinks himself better by ever so much than others, who do their duty. Surely common honesty must be one of the first lessons taught by Christianity; for that religion must be detestable which makes people worse masters, or servants, than they would have been without it. I know not what to think of that society, they must be a strange kind of people, who admit such a fellow as him amongst them. But I suppose they are all alike."

By means of slothfulness in a member the church is slandered, and hurt; the infidel is prejudiced against religion, and the bands of sin are made stronger; but this is not all. Idle persons are disorderly, and apt to be busy-bodies, and meddlers in other peoples affairs. Those who are given to industry have so much of their own to attend, that they have no time to lose, in considering the state of other peoples affairs, without an absolute necessity. But the slothful person, having nothing to do, can give himself intirely to study the concerns of others. He hath time to go about, from house to house, gossiping, and sowing the seeds of division and contention. None so likely to commence tale bearer,
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tattler and busy-body, as the slothful and indolent, therefore none so likely to become disturbers of the peace of the community. Some have been of this stamp, who, if we may judge by appearances, seem to have crept into gospel churches, merely with a view to have their sloth supported; but they ought to know, that a church cannot support an idle person, if capable of working, but in defiance of the word of God, which expressly charges, "*That he who will not work shall not eat.*"

Thirdly, the idle and slothful are not only the *pests of society*, and the *burden of churches*, but they also are their own destroyers; for instance, the sluggard leads an uncomfortable and disagreeable life; even admitting he is restrained from the enormities already mentioned. His way is like a thorn hedge, Prov. xv. 19. He meets with nothing but difficulties. There is a lion in every way, and a serpent suspected to be in every path. A mole hill to him is a mountain, and a windlestraw like a tall cedar in Lebanon. His desires are as strong, perhaps, stronger than those of others; but alas! his industry being so very far inferior to his wants, he may well be said to desire, and not have wherewithal to gratify the ardent passion; and there-

• 2 Theff. iii. 10.

fore

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fore it is, that the wise man saith, "*the desire of the slothful killeth him**." That is, through the intenseness of the desire, and the chagrine of disappointment, melancholy is bred, which preys upon the vitals, and at last stops up the springs of life themselves. He will not plough in spring, and how should he reap in harvest? He disregards the industry of the ant in the summer, and therefore cannot have recourse to her well stored granaries in winter. Nor is he likely to fare in any wise equal to those, whose industry has recommended them to the esteem of society, when he is naturally overtaken with apparent circumstances of distress. The slothful person makes all men his enemies; and he that looks to others for assistance, whilst he has a capacity to provide for himself, but neglects the means of so doing, shall find that he is utterly deserted, when in reality his necessity comes upon him. For WANT *shall* come upon him, as a man in full armour, who cannot be resisted; then what languishing desire is he exposed to; and how servilely must he cringe, to obtain a morsel of bread for sustenance, in the time of his necessity.

II. The words which are the foundation of this Discourse, "*By much slothfulness the*

* Prov. xxi. 25.

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building decayeth, and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through," may be applied to the members of a gospel church, in a collective capacity, called to be workers together with and for God. In which capacity, diligence and industry are indispensibly necessary, in order to keep the building in proper repair.

Christ Jesus our common Lord, hath furnished his church with the most profitable and salutary rules, which, notwithstanding their ease and excellence, are frequently neglected; the building falls into an apparent decay, and retains little likeness to the pattern exhibited by revelation. And this is sometimes the case, where the parties are, in some measure, sensible of the disorder, and wish it was otherwise. But it ought to be observed, that if my house has its tiles stripped off by the wind, my being sorry for it, and wishing it repaired, will not prevent the rain from dropping through. The workmen must be employed, and the tiles replaced, in order to render my dwelling comfortable. Just so it is with the church when disorders take place. Lamenting it, and talking of it from place to place, and wishing it was otherwise, will not be effectual to heal the disorder. There must be a vigorous exertion of church authority; discipline must

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must be executed according to the unmixed dictates of holy scripture, and that without delay. Therefore care ought to be taken, that church business be not committed to improper persons, as expedition in this case is as necessary as discretion. Were any part of church business committed to one, who should act like the sluggard in it, without heart and activity, making no point of conscience at all of dispatch, he would verify Solomon's words, "*As four grapes to the teeth, and smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to them that send him**," and his neglect of business may be attended with consequences which he never apprehended. For as four grapes set the teeth on edge, and unfit them for mastication, neglect of business in one department will stop the whole proceeding. Nor shall the evil stop here; for such conduct is like smoke to the eyes, which injures the sight; and it is possible that such neglect may, from mere respect to the brother so neglecting, cause a church to lose sight of the original object, and so falter in respect of duty. Now as every brother in a gospel church, formed upon an independant or scriptural plan, is called to act for the general good, it behoves every individual to call himself to account, and en-

* Prov. x. 26.

quire what part of church business lies or stops with him; perhaps this might have an happy tendency to promote dispatch.

A gospel church is a little commonwealth, in which public good is, or ought to be, *with every one, the leading object*; and where living merely to one's-self, or seeking our own, is held to be detestable and unchristian. Yet after all, it is possible that even in such a church, there may be found some, who mean no more by Christian fellowship, than meeting publicly together to partake of the word and ordinances: but such people evidently betray an inattention to the scriptures, as well as ignorance of the spirit and genius of society in general. Every member of society is interested in the most interior part of its communion; and therefore every member is by natural, as well as scriptural obligations, as much bound to attend private church meetings, as he is to attend the most public appointments of the church.

It is even possible, in a Christian society, to find some, who may be active and diligent providers for their own houses, tender and loving husbands, industrious and kind parents, faithful and benevolent masters, who at the same time are meer sluggards in the matters of Christ's kingdom.

These

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These act consistently as men, but inconsistently as Christians, and servants to the King of kings. Now, as all effects whatever proceed from certain causes, it may not be amiss, under this head, first to enquire into the causes, why active men, respecting worldly things, are sometimes slothful in performing the work of God's sanctuary; then secondly, to shew that the whole of this is mistaken conduct.

I. Men of activity in providing for their own houses, are sometimes very slothful in the business of Christ's kingdom; at least dilatory in pursuing the interest of that church in particular, with which they stand connected; which slothfulness may arise from all, and certainly does from one of the following causes, *self-love—mistrust—covetousness—an undue regard to the conduct of others.*

First, Self-love will give the preference to our own affairs, and lead to a neglect of the Redeemer's church, and its concerns, as seemingly to us of less importance. Hence the following reasoning arises; church business to be sure ought to be attended to by somebody; things are not so well as might be wished. But what can I do, I have so many burdens of my own? I must look to my own houses and lands, and improve the talents entrusted with me. I must take care of my wife, my children,
and

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and other near relations, that have a dependence on me. And hence if you thus address some individuals, "Well, Christ is to be worshipped to-day." You will have for answer, I cannot attend; for I have a customer to meet at such a place; a sale or some other urgent business in hand, therefore I pray thee have me excused. "The church has business which must be done to-night;" but I have affairs of very great importance of my own to attend to, which, if neglected, may be of bad consequences; they can do well enough without me; what can be expected from one that has so many cares of his own upon him, wherefore I pray thee have me excused*. In this case it is very easy to see to whom the preference is given, to self or the blessed Jesus; so that without any difficulty it will be seen, that self is the great Antichrist to be guarded against, and that all self-love is Antichristianism. Let you and me beware of pluming ourselves with the honours due to the head of the church, and of appropriating to private purposes the time and talents bestowed for public

* This is not intended to censure an occasional absence, from something happening of more than ordinary importance; but such an heartless indifference, as makes church affairs seem to be of little moment in the eye of some professors.

good

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good. It is not enough to avoid being a burden to a church, and giving no uneasiness, but all are called to study usefulness. The servant with one talent was not cast out for embezzling his lord's money, for he kept it very carefully tied in a napkin, and for greater security hid it in the earth; but he was rejected for not improving the talent with which he was entrusted. To be satisfied therefore with being able to say, "I never was troublesome to the church;" is foolish and absurd: thou hast been a robber of Christ, and his church too, if thine own affairs in the family have superseded thy care, industriously to promote the good of his interest.

Secondly, Another cause of this slothfulness in the things of God, and the great concerns of his house, is mistrust in the divine Providence, as if the Lord could not, or would not take care of your business, whilst you are conscientiously giving your attendance to the duties of your station in his sanctuary. Ziklag, David's residence, was indeed spoiled by the enemy, in the absence of him and his men; but then they were not absent from their houses upon the concerns of God's house, but had joined themselves to *Achish*, the enemy of Israel: so that the sacking of *Ziklag*, and the capture of his wives, may rather be
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considered as a just rebuke, than a neglect of holy Providence. But it was far otherwise with the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh, whose inheritance lay beyond Jordan, adjoining to the countries of enemies; they left their lands defenceless, when all their males went annually up to Shiloh to worship; yet did not their enemies invade their lands, for God was the guardian of their wives and little ones; so that their country never enjoyed more profound peace, than when its strength was withdrawn, on account of their being required to appear before him annually. You who are masters and mistresses expect no more of your servants, than that they should do your business. It is their part to perform it faithfully, and it is yours to provide for them necessary food, and the appointed reward whilst they are about it. We are all servants to God our Saviour, who challengeth the honour due to him. "If I be a master where is my fear*?" Ought not we then to allow him the honour of a master, by seeing faithfully and diligently to the business of his house; and whilst so doing, leaving it to him to take care of our food, raiment, and all necessary concerns? But it argues a great deal of infidelity, when we

* Mal. i. 6.

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dare not leave the disposal of our temporal affairs to him whose work we are called to attend.

Thirdly, Another ground of this slothfulness, in respect to the house of God, is covetousness; that sordid, mean and base disposition, so unbecoming a child of God, and heir of immortal glory. It is not indeed an easy matter to persuade any man that he is a covetous person; and self-adulation hath still made it more difficult, having devised feigned names, such as frugality and industry, by which it is usually called. But I think that, with great safety, we may call by that sordid name, all desire of getting more of the world, than is consistent with our duty in the house of God. I have well weighed this rule, and cannot see the least impropriety in it, and if it is admitted as valid, it will follow, that very many of the members of gospel churches, must be ranked along with this grovelling class of men, who also class with idolaters and worshippers of Mammon. Besides, this vile principle tacitly brings the charge of injustice against the moral government of God, in requiring of us more than is really consistent with our well-being as Christians. Beware, therefore, how you neglect the duties of God's house, for the sake of your own temporal

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temporal emolument, seeing every such neglect is, in itself, a charge against God, your Saviour and lawgiver, as gathering where he hath not strowed, and reaping where he hath not sown. And remember this, that if God was to roll into your possession all the riches of the East, they would not add the least degree of comfort and pleasure to you in your dying moments. Nothing then will give you satisfaction, but the presence of that God, whose service you are now called to pursue. And is it not preposterous for people, contrary to the dictates of their own enlightened minds, to make so much ado about what will yield neither pleasure nor profit on a dying day? Once more;

Fourthly, Another spring of this neglect of duty, or slothfulness respecting the affairs of the house of God, is a mistaken regard to the conduct of others, making that, instead of God's word, the rule by which our religious behaviour is governed. At first view, one would indeed think, that people who have faith in their hearts, and the Bible, in their hands; people who profess to have submitted to Jesus as the only lawgiver to his church, could not be guilty of a conduct so dishonouring to the Saviour, and so preposterous in itself, as to be at all influenced by the example of others,

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others, whether churches or individuals, so as to make it any part of our rule. Yet even from the beginning it was so, as we find in the case of Peter, whose dissingenuous behaviour at Antioch drew Barnabas into dissimulation along with him. It still has its influence, not only over individuals, but over the spirit and conduct of some churches, whose profession gave room to have hoped for a more consistent and uniform regard to the Redeemer's sacred authority.

Two classes of people are in a special manner liable to be affected by the example of others. The *slothful* and the *fearful*.

First, The slothful, in what capacity soever, will be apt to rest satisfied, that in his religious conversation he is not far behind his neighbours. Tell him, "you was not with us on the last occasion." You have his answer, "I was not; but there was brother *such a one*, he was not there neither." Tell him, "I seldom see you at church meeting, I should be glad, my brother, to see you oftener among us." His answer is ready again, "I come as often as I can; I believe I am full as often there as brother *such a one*, or brother *such a one*; if all would come as often as I do, we should be more full than we

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“ frequently are.” Now this may all be true; but how true soever, what is it to the purpose? What is the conduct of others to thee? Surely it is no part of thy rule. The whole matter lies finally between God and thy own soul. The behaviour of every member of a gospel community, is or ought to be independant of all influence, besides that of Christ’s authority in the scriptures of truth; and thy only rule, O believer, is what the Lord thy God requires of thee, and not what brother such a one does, or leaves undone.

Again, the slothful are very apt to pay an undue regard to the state and order of other churches of the same persuasion; such a man is more apt to compare the community to which he belongs with them, than with the apostolic church, our only pattern; and to rest satisfied with being able to say, our church falls little short of any of our sister churches, either in faith or order, though it comes not up to the purity of the primitive church. But why are churches called independent, but from their professed regard to the scriptures, exclusive of any other influence whatever, as their only rule both of faith and discipline, consistent with the true spirit and genius of the gospel? Churches in any sense, under the influence of others, or mutually influencing

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fluencing one another, may, indeed, if they choose it, call themselves independents; but in truth they have no more of independency than the empty, and (with them) unmeaning name. But what is it to one church how another is managed? That we are upon a level with others in point of regularity, is no manner of proof that we are right, unless we have the conviction in our own hearts, that we for ourselves, as a church, do really go forth by the footsteps of the flock, and walk in the good old way, to be discovered nowhere but in the volume of Revelation. In point of faith we will be satisfied for ourselves, and will receive nothing but upon rational evidence; and is there not equal reason for us to satisfy ourselves, from God's unerring word, what is the discipline instituted by the Redeemer? To talk of things being left to discretion, in reference to church discipline, as some have done, is an *impious slander* upon the BIBLE, representing it as a rule inadequate to the purposes of practical religion. Why should we be satisfied with ranking with others here, when we would not choose to risk our state with a being classed with any set of men hereafter, without knowing of a truth, that their faith and practice are actually built upon the prophets and apostles, Christ himself being the chief corner stone. In a

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word, every individual, and every church, is called to act in all things as the Bible directs; to the law, therefore, and to the testimony, for whosoever walks not according to this rule, it is because there is no light in them.

Secondly, Another class of people, whose conduct is absolutely limited by that of others, is the fearful; who are so extremely prudent, delicate, and modest, that they dare not be too zealous in their attachment to the simplicity of the scriptures, either in faith or practice, for fear of giving offence to others, especially to those who love to have the preheminance. It is not the practical opinion of all who have places in gospel churches, that it is better to obey God than man; and hence light is stifled, and the powers of the mind become slaves to the passions and prejudices of others, instead of being subject to Christ's authority in the scriptures. But how preposterous, unchristian and unmanly is this mistaken conduct! If other men are really lovers of your Redeemer, your zeal for his honour, your firm attachment to Bible authority, and your study to maintain consciences void of offence before God, as well as before man, will not, cannot, be offensive to them; and if they are such who love to have the preheminance,
and

and want, at all events, to establish their own authority, they are to be disregarded, as enemies to the gospel of Christ. But remember, that when your study, to avoid giving offence to man, brings guilt upon your consciencies before an heart-searching God, you act, in a manner, very unbecoming the name and character of a Christian. As the fear of man never fails to bring a snare, it ought to be guarded against; and the followers of Christ should study to be as much in earnest in his service, as worldings of every kind are in making provision for the flesh, to gratify the worse than brutal desires of sensual affection; remembering always that one is our Master, even Jesus, who was crucified for us and rose again; and that all fear which restrains from the exercise of duty is sinful in its nature, and ought to be guarded against, as we would wish to avoid the upbraidings of a guilty conscience.

Having traced this slothfulness in the way, and work of God to its proper springs, I shall now,

II. Shew that it is utterly wrong, and injurious to our own houses, as well as to the house of God, which is his church and people.

Ist, It is so far from gaining the approbation of the blessed Governor, that it

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really subjects unto his sharp rebuke, as is clear from the case of the two sisters of *Lazarus, Martha, and Mary*, whose spirit and conduct were very different, and whose treatment by their heavenly guest was in all respects as different, and properly adapted to their several dispositions.

If immoderate care could at all be justified, *Martha* had not been reprov'd; for she had as much to plead in her own excuse, as can be pretended to by any of her kinsfolks, who imitate the anxiety of her spirit, and stand aloof from the feet of their Saviour.—She was not *mistress* of the house, but *housekeeper to her brother Lazarus*, and therefore her conduct was subject to his inspection.—She had a great entertainment to provide, which required much solicitude and industry, especially as the Son of God, the Lord of heaven and earth, was the principal among her company, for whom the feast was providing.—She had a sister so taken up with religion, that, whatever was to be done in the house, she minded nothing but hearing of Christ's sermons, and sitting at his feet when in company. No doubt it was very provoking to careful busy *Martha*, to see her sister so inattentive to household affairs, when she herself was in such a pother. She thought that *Mary* might have come of her own accord,

accord, and said, " Sister shall I assist you : " But *Mary* continued as thoughtless, as if there had been no bustle in the family. Wherefore she could bear it no longer, but resolved to give her the hearing of it, and that to mortify her the more before all the company. Well, she comes, and lays her appeal before *Jesus*, and wanted him to side with her in reproving her neglectful sister. " *Lord, dost not thou care that my sister hath left me to serve alone ? Bid her therefore that she help me*.* " As if she had said, " It is not so strange that my sister should leave me in this hurry of business to serve alone ; for that is common with her, she minds nothing but running after preaching, whatever is to be done at home ; but I wonder that *Jesus* should countenance her in her carelessness : thou Lord teachest the ways of God in truth ; wilt not thou convince my sister of her mistaken conduct, and stir her up to diligence in her domestic station. It must be right, therefore bid her at once that she come to my assistance. " Such was her appeal ; but what answer does she receive ? Why, a very mortifying one ; a severe reproof. " *Martha, Martha, thou art cumbered about many things, but one thing is needful, and Mary hath chosen that good part*

* Luke x. 40.

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which shall not be taken from her." q. d.

"*Martha, Martha*, thou art so full of perplexing care thyself, that it blinds thee to thy true privilege; thou canst not be easy without lugging in both heaven and earth to join in thine anxieties. Wouldest thou have me, *Martha*, who am come from heaven for thy redemption, to join thee in the low and pitiful cares which pain thy bosom, and check that conduct, which of all others is the most acceptable to me. *Mary's* tears bedewing my feet, and her attentive regard to my doctrine, is by far more pleasing to me, than the sumptuous feast which thou art providing, *Martha*. I therefore justify thy sister's conduct, and highly approve the choice she has made, and will encourage and protect her in its enjoyment." Thus it is manifest, that worldly care, which is protractive of spiritual duty, shall never obtain the divine approbation.

2. If he that forsakes all shall have an hundred fold in this life, besides eternal life in the world to come; and if he that will lose his life for the sake of Christ and his Gospel, shall save it, it is easy and natural to shew, that the best way to secure your property from the ravages of villany, and your families from want and penury, is to be careful and diligent in the affairs

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affairs of God's tabernacle. If his church lies warm upon your affections, and his glory in his house is the object of your main concern, he will, in very faithfulness, take care of you and your affairs. You may, indeed, for the present, seem to be losers by your attention to church concerns; but it will be more than abundantly made up to you, by providentially guarding you against the machinations of villany, by which you might otherwise have your circumstances ruined, or by leading you into such connections, or into such a chain of events, as shall be greatly to your advantage. Nothing can be more certain than that, if you are conscientious in the discharge of your duty in the church of God, aiming singly at the Redeemer's honour, as the first concern of your lives; and leading aim in the bent of your conduct, he will build you houses as he did the Egyptian midwives, who hazarded the king's displeasure rather than destroy the hope of Israel. All your striving to get riches, or indeed to keep what you have gotten, will be absolutely in vain, if God does not do both for you: the Lord must both build and watch, or builder and watchman labour in vain. Divine Providence alone maketh rich and maketh poor; and who are most likely to be its favoured objects;

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jects; he that serveth God, or he that serveth himself, Jesus will determine in these remarkable words, "*If any man serve me, him will my Father honour.*" He that serveth Jesus by making his honour in his church, the first object of his pursuit, he will honour in his providence in this life, as well as with a crown of glory in the life which is to come. And I think the proper negative of this is, that he that honoureth not Jesus the Son, shall not be honoured of the Father. If you are careful for God's glory, you may make yourselves very easy about the rest; God will take your temporal affairs upon himself, and you shall profit exceedingly. You shall not have it to say, that your Redeemer is an hard and austere Master; a tyrant as well as a sovereign. None ever yet lost by the service of God, nor by it shall any ever be loser.

Remember what choice young Solomon made, and what he got by his wisdom. Just on his accession to the throne of Israel, God appeared to him in a vision of the night, left it to him to ask one of three things, and freely to take his choice. Having such an extensive prospect opened before him, a giddy thoughtless youth would have asked mountains of boundless wealth, the dazzling splendor of princely honours,
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the empire of the world, or twice the days of the oldest of men. But Solomon, divinely led, considered properly his personal situation, as at the head of the Hosts of God, and governor of all the tribes of Israel; willing to govern, not as a tyrant who seeks his own, but as vicegerent to the Almighty for the public good. He fixes his heart upon wisdom, to enable him to rule for God, according to and the ends for which he was raised up, and thus expresseth his choice. "*Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people; for who can judge this thy so great people?*" He confines his choice entirely to wisdom, and that to one species of wisdom only; wisdom for the government of God's inheritance. But lo! he obtains all things else without asking for them; wisdom of every kind, natural, moral, and spiritual, were granted to him; riches and honour more than ever fell to the lot of any other potentate whatever. So shall it be with those of you who choose wisdom and spiritual prudence, to make you useful in the house of God, he will take care of your houses as he did of Solomon's.

But if self must prevail, and your own concerns must have the ascendancy over those of the church, he will smite your houses in the four corners, there shall be a moth

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moth in every bag; a worm at the root of every pleasant gourd, and desolation shall be the lot of your inheritance. He will send villains to defraud you; he will bewilder you in your commercial affairs, that you shall choose the evil and leave the good, and speedily bring destruction upon your comforts. Unless, indeed, thou art a very muck-worm, and hast no portion in the future life; in this case he may treat thee as a bastard, and let thee have thy portion continued to the end of thy days. But if you are born from above, he will bring you by one means or another to prefer the concerns of his house to every private affair of your own. This, if I mistake not, is the reason why some professors are visited with so many stripping providences, because they would not trust the great Governor with them, and gave their own affairs the preference unto those of his church and people.

III. The words are capable of a further improvement still, and may be applied to the work of grace, carried on in individuals by the Holy Ghost, in the use of instituted means. And in this sense, as well as the former, it may be truly said, that "*By much slothfulness the building decayeth, and through idleness of the hands the house droppeth through.*" It might indeed be naturally

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turally expected, that those who have tasted the sweetness of divine love shed abroad in their hearts, who have an heaven of happiness and glory in view, would be diligent in the use of every means, for the cherishing of that sweet delight, which, at certain seasons, they have had in the enjoyment of God, as their chiefest good. That those who, having experienced the severe conflicts, attending the first awakenings of the soul, triumphed over all the clamours of a guilty conscience, by having attained the peace of God which passeth all understanding, to keep their hearts and minds thro' Christ Jesus, should afterwards return to the neglect of those very means in which they obtained these benefits so munificent may seem astonishing. Yet it is even true, that Ephraim, altho' taught by the Almighty to go, may become like a silly dove, without heart to the means of grace, and in a way of backsliding, set his face towards Egypt and Assyria. Believers may fall from their first love, and become neither cold nor hot; may be almost as if they had never seen nor approved of the Lord Jesus. But ah! what a wilderness situation is such a soul in? How dreadful and deplorable!

It cannot be unseasonable to shew by what means and degrees degeneracy advances, and destroys the liveliness and com-

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forts of the soul; and most usually it is in some such a manner as the following. First, worldly cares prevail over our spiritual concerns, so that one or other of the instituted means comes to be neglected, perhaps reading the word, which, although not totally omitted when cares become prevalent, meets but with a cursory reading without due attention. The neglect of one duty usually leads to that of another, and from an estrangement from private duties, grows a neglect of those of public worship; and that person who can live without his Bible through the week, could also, but for decency or shame, do without the ministry of the word on the ensuing sabbath. Hence a small matter will prevent coming out on Lord's day morning, and a little time will make it so habitual, that you can lose the morning part of every Lord's day, without much upbraidings of conscience. When it comes to this, you will not stop here, but you will venture upon an afternoon now and then, which may at first be attended with many remonstrances of conscience against your slothfulness; but you will have an expedient at hand, you can read your Bible or some other good book during service time, which may, if grace prevent not, entirely silence your clamorous hearts; especially, if Sa-

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tan is permitted to give you comfort in the neglect of means. I say Satan, for I believe not that God gives comfort to his people but in the use of appointed means; whilst they are easily to be had. To talk of being comforted in the wilful neglect of ordinances, is meer delusion, and not to be regarded, seeing God hath declared, that he delighteth more in the gates of Zion, than in all the dwellings of Jacob. The plain sense of which is, "God delighteth more in the publick worship of his name, in the assemblies of his people, than in family worship, however seasonably and devoutly performed. Therefore when pretended personal devotion supersedes the use of his public ordinances, it is not to be supposed that it can be acceptable to him, and therefore it cannot be truly comfortable to the party.

Farther, when you have habituated yourselves for a certain time, to a neglect of public worship, and your place has been empty from time to time in the church, a shyness will come upon your spirit, that you will not much care to have any intercourse with your brethren, for fear they should reprove your slothfulness. The next thing naturally consequent upon this is shame; shame will drive you away altogether, and it is much if the evil of your

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backsliding will be confined to yourselves. You cannot readily confess yourselves in the fault, much less to be wilful backsliders, therefore your invention will work for some excuse or other, as a refuge for your credit. Something in the minister, or the ministry, or some misconduct of the church towards one or other of its members, in all probability will be alledged as an excuse for your neglect. Imperfection will here furnish but too plausible a pretence for you, seeing your minister is a man of like passions with yourselves, and therefore every part of his spirit and conduct, may not be able to stand the strictest enquiry. As to his ministry, he sees but in part, and therefore he can prophesy only in part; though he may have much knowledge, he is also posselt of much ignorance, and therefore it may rationally be concluded, that every sentence delivered by him cannot bear the strict scrutiny of those who are determined to criticize and find fault. The church also is under the same predicament as a society of imperfect men; so that, however regular and well designed their views may be, imperfections, yea errors, will sometimes be visible in their proceedings, and of course it is no difficult matter for a backslider, when he determines on it, to find a subterfuge in the imperfections of others.

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others. But what a deplorable situation is that unhappy person in, who can stoop to such mean and dishonourable shifts. He puts me in mind of Adam, who, to excuse his own disobedience, became the accuser of his bosom companion, confessedly bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh.

Farther still ; Since I have been conversant with professors, I have known some who, through the whole week, were wont to have health sufficient to enable them to attend to their worldly business, but most commonly indisposed on the Lord's day, so as to detain them at home. Just as if they had been under some periodical disease, the paroxysm of which was weekly, and always fixed its return on the Sabbath day. Such diseases being unknown to physicians, one would be tempted to think, that in such cases the indisposition was feigned, and if so, it doubly aggravates their guilt, and makes the neglect of God's ordinances abundantly more dreadful. However, it is a maxim with me, from which I cannot depart, that, in ordinary cases, the same degree of health, which will enable a person to go about his business through the week, if continued, will be sufficient to bring him to the church of God on his holy day, to join in his instituted worship.

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We ought to look well to the beginnings of backsliding, for if it is indulged, it is unknown where it may end. It is like the breaking in of water, which, though it begin only in drops, may, if not prevented, end in an inundation, that shall sweep away all before it, as has been the case with many.

Now to conclude, I shall beg leave to address my readers as members of civil society, and request each, well to consider his conduct in that connection in which he stands; being fully persuaded, that an upright conscientious discharge of duty in civil and domestic life, is indispensibly necessary to our supporting the honourable character of Christians, or followers of Jesus. And,

First, I would address myself to you, who are servants or apprentices, from whom the word of God challenges, not only obedience to your masters, but all diligence and industrious dispatch of their temporal business. And indeed it is morally impossible, that a slothful and untrusty servant can be a fervent Christian, and an honourable church member. It has been suspected, that many who stand in the relation of servants, have been so far from acting towards their masters, as servants of God; to whom they were accountable, that their
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main, if not their only design, seemed to be, to serve themselves of their masters and mistresses. Where this is the case, it is impossible that the fear of God can be before the eyes of the parties, and that they study to maintain consciences void of offence, both towards God, and towards man. Impossible, therefore, that a person of that conduct can be a faithful servant of the living God, seeing he is not so much as faithful to his engagements with man. It is not enough that a servant is honest, and may be trusted with his master's substance, if he is not also diligent in dispatch of his business. Servants are apt to form high expectations from believing masters, as if in their service they should enjoy uncommon privileges; and they are frequently mortified by disappointment, for want of duly considering, that believing masters have business to be done, or they would not be under the necessity of, at all, keeping servants; and that their disappointment as frequently arises from their own negligence, as from any default on the part of their masters. Every servant ought to consider, that whilst he is under his master's roof, his time and talents are his master's property by mutual agreement. I am aware that an objection will here be made, and it will be asked, What, must a servant then have

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have no time that he can call his own, and which he may apply to religious purposes? To which I answer.

First, A conscientious discharge of duty towards your master makes all the time your own; for whilst you are faithfully serving him, you are obeying and maintaining consciences void of offence before God, your heavenly Father; which great privilege you lose when slothful in your master's business. There is a serving God in your generation work, as well as in the assemblies of his people; and a part of service too, incumbent on every human being.

Secondly, By a diligent attention to your master's business, you put it into his power to indulge you in every wished for privilege; as his affairs suffer no loss by your devotion to Christ in his ordinances; and a man must be his own enemy, who would deny a faithful diligent servant any reasonable privileges, as such a one must be a blessing to his family, and to all his affairs; to his store, and to his basket. But if a servant is slothful, and neglects his daily concerns, he puts it absolutely out of his master's power to give those indulgences, as in the case abovementioned. His business, which obliges him to keep servants, must be done; and therefore if neglected

neglected through the day, it must be dispatched at night; and so it falls out, that the slothful servant can have no time to himself, either for religious or other purposes. I am afraid it will be found, that the confinement of many servants ariseth from their own slothfulness, rather than the avarice of their masters. Although I am far from denying, that this avarice may sometimes be the cause of just complaint.

Yet it is my opinion in general, that where servants are really conscientious in their discharge of duty, God will so overrule their masters hearts, be they avaricious or benevolent, that their religious privileges shall be no way abridged. Let every professor, who stands in the relation of a servant, hear and regard Paul's injunction *. *Servants be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart as unto Christ: not with eye-service, as men pleasers, but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not unto men: knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doth, the same shall he receive of the Lord whether he be bond or free.*" From whence it is observable, that Christian servants are called to act in all things

* Ephes. vi. 5, 6, 7, 8.

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towards their masters, as if it were to Christ himself, and that not with a view to please men, so much as to do the will of God, from the heart, from a single aim to glorify their Redeemer. Or, as this apostle elsewhere expresseth it, "That ye may adorn the doctrine of God, our Saviour, in all things*." Without an observance of such rules, it is plain, that you cannot be an honour, nor a blessing to the church of Jesus.

II. I would address myself to those who stand in the relation of husbands and fathers, and in whose conduct slothfulness, in respect to the things either of the civil or religious life, is of the most malignant influence. In this case it is certainly true, that, "*through much slothfulness the building decayeth, and through idleness of the hands, the house droppeth through.*" There is not a character among professors more disagreeable; none upon whom the scriptures pour more abundant contempt †. "*But if any provide not for his own, especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.*" There is indeed something shocking and detestable in the character of an idle parent, and the more abominable still, if he is a professor, and pretends to the knowledge of things spiritual. I have known

* 1 Tim. vi. 4.

† 1 Tim. v. 8.

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some of this gossiping class, who understood every thing but their own proper duty; and who were ready and active enough, in every department, besides that in which divine Providence had placed them. Wretched must that woman be who is yoked with such an husband. Deplorable the state of those children who are under the tuition of such a parent. Burdened and grieved must that church be, who are unhappy enough to suffer such a one to creep into their fellowship; but a church hath the means of relief in its own hands, as pointed out by the scriptures; and excommunication of the party removes the incumbrance from them.

That this is their immediate duty; that a person who provides not for his own family, without some visible impediment, which shall make his incapacity manifest, shall not abide in gospel fellowship, is very evident from the apostle's description of such a one; "He hath denied the faith by his *deeds* (however good his verbal confession may be) and is *worse* than infidel." Now if he hath denied the faith, he is no fit companion for believers, the saints of Jesus. If he were but on a level with infidels, we should not tolerate him in our communion. And can it be that, being worse than an infidel, he shall continue to enjoy

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enjoy the privileges of God's children, and be suffered to continue a dishonour to the name of Jesus, and a stain to the Christian profession?

But alas! the influence of his impious idleness in his other connections, seem to be irremediable, without some wonderful and amazing interposition of divine Providence. What penury must attend his table? What wretched circumstances must his spouse, however virtuous, experience? But the greatest evil attends his unhappy offspring, in a case more pitiable than that of orphans, yet deprived of that assistance, with which the circumstances of orphans are in some measure relieved. His unhappy children are not only exposed to penury and pinching hunger, but are denied the means of instruction; perhaps so far neglected, as to be incapable of reading their Bibles. It is but a few days since, I conversed with two men, sons of such a parent, who lamented to me the conduct of their father, in totally neglecting their education; the want of which exposed them to such difficulties in life, as they might otherwise, in all probability, have avoided. And he also, by the way, has been a flaming professor; and a zealous stickler for the more curious distinctions, with which
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Some high-fliers delight to amuse themselves.

But their entire want of education is not the whole of the evil that arises from the unmanly, and impious indolence of parents of this character. Their example is baneful, and destructive of the morals of their children, and they prove, if grace prevent not, the instrument of their entire ruin. If they follow the example of such fathers, they also will take to the ways of idleness; and when they come to reason upon its effects, must of course be led to think very indifferently of their parent's religion, and perhaps throw off all religious restraints whatever. And who knows where the end may be?

I descend into a description of this part of low life, not with so much as a hope of being read by the parties concerned; but with a view to stir up Christian societies to guard against characters so pernicious, and to excite those who may happen to be conversant with such people, to treat them as enemies to the Cross of Christ, that they may be ashamed, and study a reformation of manners. He that is attentive to the duties of his station, in the church, in the family, and in the world, will find no time at all to devote to idleness and dissipation.

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May God grant, that a sense of the value of precious time may rest upon my heart, and that of my reader; that we both may walk circumspectly, redeeming every moment to the important purposes of our soul concerns.

F I N I S.

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